

Neither Empty nor Unknown

Montana at the Time of Lewis and Clark



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Neither Empty Nor Unknown

by GEORGE OBERST

To commemorate the bicentennial anniversary of the Lewis and Clark Expedition's exploration of Montana, the Montana Historical Society created the exhibit *Neither Empty Nor Unknown: Montana at the Time of Lewis and Clark*. The exhibit addresses why the Corps of Discovery saw so few of the region's native residents and also why they failed to understand the evidence of occupation that they did see. Critical to the creation of this exhibit were the descendants of these people—Indian elders, tribal council members, educators, and artists who provided information, ideas, and art to tell the story of Montana as it was two hundred years ago.

In 1803, when the United States acquired the territory that would become Montana, the lands within it were little known. Traders on the region's periphery had gleaned some information from their Indian clients, but to most Europeans and Americans the area remained a vast, untracked wilderness.

Despite Euramerican ignorance of the region, however, in 1800 Montana was neither empty nor unknown. It was the homeland of six tribal groups and a place regularly visited by others. Physical features had names, and sites for spiritual communion dotted the landscape. Plants and animals were harvested according to seasonal cycles, with several tribes using favored hunting locations at different times to reduce conflict and increase success. A network

Grand Entry at Rocky Boy's Pow Wow, by Ken Blackbird, Assiniboine (1992)

Modern-day tribal members—the descendants of the people who lived in Montana when Lewis and Clark traveled through in 1805—participate in powwows like the one pictured here to honor the rich cultures and traditions of their ancestors.



Courtesy Ken Blackbird

Montana at the Time of Lewis and Clark



of maintained trails allowed travel across seemingly impenetrable mountains and featureless plains. Intertribal trade brought products and ideas from distant places and diverse cultures. Horses, knives, and horrible diseases came to Montana long before the first white person set foot there.

For Indian peoples, the era of Lewis and Clark was a period of great turmoil. As European nations and the newly independent United States competed for territory and influence along both coasts and the border with Mexico, settlement and competition pushed resident Indian nations into the territories of their inland neighbors, fueling intertribal conflict. The pressure forced weaker interior peoples even farther inland. Forest tribes moved onto the prairies; prairie tribes moved onto the plains. The introduction of European technologies and infectious diseases also caused significant changes in homelands and land use.

The tribes living in or regularly using Montana at the time of Lewis and Clark were the Nakota (Assini-

boine), Pi Kani (Blackfeet), Kenistenoag (Cree), Apsaalooke (Crow), A A Ni Nin (Gros Ventre), Kasanka band of 'Aqtsmaknik (Kootenai), Selis and Ql 'ispe' (Salish and Pend d'Oreille), and Akidika (Lemhi Shoshone). The Nez Perce both lived in and visited the area seasonally, while the Lakota (Sioux), Tse-ts-hes-stahase (Northern Cheyenne), Anishinabe (Chippewa, including the Little Shell band), and Métis moved into Montana after Lewis and Clark crossed it. By the latter half of the nineteenth century, the Lemhi Shoshones and the Nez Perces had settled in Idaho. Mistakes and misnomers plague today's common tribal names just as they did at the time of Lewis and Clark.

The *Neither Empty Nor Unknown* exhibit follows Lewis and Clark's geographic route while discussing the native cultures and lifeways missed by the Corps as they traversed the region. All reproduction shelters, clothing, household goods, and tools in the exhibit are replicas of those in use when Lewis and Clark came to Montana in 1805.



***The Plains the Way They Were*, by Robert F. Morgan (2005, oil on canvas mural)**

All spring and early summer of 1805 the Corps pulled their laden boats up the swift, cold Missouri. Isolated within the river's canyon, they saw no native people—only abandoned winter camps, spiritual offerings, and other structures they did not recognize—reinforcing Lewis's notion that Montana was an unoccupied hunting territory. Only the captains and a few skilled hunters walked the plains above the river to note the teeming herds of game from which they easily supplied the party with meat.



***Buffalo Decoy*, by Robert M. Scriver (1978, bronze)**

As Lewis and Clark learned, horses were not common or evenly distributed among the western tribes. Most Plains Indians had few. Consequently, hunting was a group activity performed on foot. Traps called impoundments or pounds were the most common method for harvesting large animals. Hunters built a large log enclosure, the pound, at the bottom of a draw, then hazed, or like the decoy depicted here, led, bison or other herbivores into the depression. A narrowing V of brush and rocks called a drive line prevented the nervous animals from easily altering their course and also hid the hunters. As the milling animals passed, each hidden participant rose with a shout, waving a piece of hide to frighten the animals toward the pound.

MHS Museum, Helena, gift of Lorraine Scriver



***Buffalo pound moccasins*, by Gary Johnson, Métis (2004)**

Traditionally only a hunter who filled the dangerous role of decoy or hazer wore moccasins with this buffalo pound design.

MHS Museum, Helena



***Rampant Buffalo*, by Scott Hayes (2006, bas relief); push-spear and sun visor, by Ken Woody (2004); leggings, moccasins, and medicine necklace, by Gary Johnson, Métis (2004)**

Once enclosed within the pound, the milling bison prevented one another's escape while hunters with push-spears and bows and arrows killed as many as possible. Tribes attached high status to the dangerous roles of buffalo runner and hunter. These individuals showed their status with clothing decoration exclusive to their station as providers for the people.

Assiniboine cradleboard, maker unknown (2005); dress, moccasins, and belt,

by Ken Woody (2004)

Camp life focused on butchering meat, preserving it by drying, and preparing hides for later use. From early childhood, children participated first as observers and later as apprentices, learning the tasks necessary to sustain the communal band.



MHS Museum, Helena



Kootenai doll-sized cradleboard, by Gigi Caye and Rosemary Caye, Kootenai (2004); Cree moss bag, by Kathryn Goggles, Cree, (2004); Salish doll-sized cradleboard, by Mary Jane Charlo, Salish (2003)

Baby carriers used at the time Lewis and Clark visited illustrate the unique cultures and practices of the diverse nations. Moss bags, like the Cree example, predate cradleboards and take their name from the lining of moss or soft leaves that served as diapers. The Crees, whose northern relatives participated in the fur trade, would have decorated the carrier with glass beads for ornamentation. The Kootenais, primarily a forest people, made cradleboards of readily available birch bark and padded it with rabbit fur to keep the infant warm. Native trade networks brought seashells to inland people who had yet to acquire European trade goods, and Corps members would have seen shell decorations on clothing and cradleboards like this doll-sized Salish baby carrier.

Educator Mouse leads children through the *Neither Empty nor Unknown* exhibit, teaching them about aspects of Indian life at the time of Lewis and Clark. Then, as now, children learned skills through observation, imitation, and practice, as when boys improved their marksmanship through hunting games.

MHS Museum, Helena



*"The hawks in the air
and weasels on the
ground hunt me every
day. And now, the
young boys hunt me,
too."*

John Potter, Anishinabe, 2006



William Standing, Assiniboine
Boy's Sport: Shooting Mice
Land of Nakoda, 1912
Museum Collection

Practicing skills
you will need as an
adult is the most
effective way of
learning them.

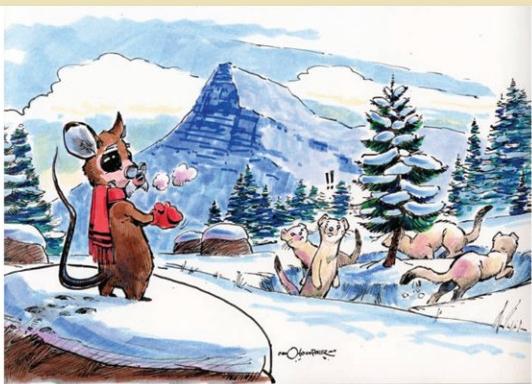
***Boy's Sport: Shooting Mice*, by William Standing, Assiniboine (from *Land of Nakoda* . . . [Helena, Mont.], 1942); Educator Mouse, by John Potter, Anishinabe (2006, watercolor)**

Careful observation of animals teaches many things.

An Indian dance was created by watching prairie grouse dance.



John Potter, Anishinabe, 2006



"When I see the weasels dancing, it makes me happy—it means that they are not out hunting me!"

John Potter, Anishinabe, 2006

MHS Museum, Helena

***Indian Dance*, by John Potter, Anishinabe (2006, watercolor)**

“[T]he Indian road which he [Captain Clark] pursued over this mountain is wide and appears as if it had been cut down or dug in many places.”

CAPTAIN MERIWETHER
LEWIS, July 18, 1805, in
present-day Lewis and Clark
County above Holter Dam



MHS Museum, Helena

The Proposal, by Gary Schildt, Blackfeet (2006, oil on canvas mural);
dog travois, by Ken Woody (2004); parfleches on horse travois, by Darrell
Norman, Blackfeet (2006)

Expedition journal keepers made routine note of “Indian roads.” Their repeated references make it clear that they did not mean trails. They meant the same type of route that served the young United States in western Pennsylvania and Tennessee—roads. Horses first entered Montana about 1750, but before that time Indian people had traveled extensively for millennia with their dogs. Depending on the difficulty of the terrain, a dog with travois could haul thirty to fifty pounds. Each family had six to twelve dogs, and, by 1805, a few horses.



Cowrie shell necklace,
Northern Plains (circa 1880,
cowrie shells and glass beads)

Pacific Ocean seashells were common decorative elements in Montana at the time of Lewis and Clark. The closest source of cowrie shells is southern California. So active was native travel and trade that one of the war axes made by the expedition’s blacksmith for the hospitable Mandans during the winter of 1804–5 arrived by trade in central Washington by the fall of 1805, ahead of the Corps.

MHS Museum, Helena



Blackfeet Buffalo Runner, by Angelika Harden-Norman (2003)

Members of the Blackfeet tribe are attempting to recover the Spanish Barb bloodlines of the Indian buffalo ponies. Originally brought to North America by Spanish conquistadors in the 1500s, many of these horses were lost or stolen. By 1750, Indian tribes in Montana owned some horses and were eager to acquire more. The Spanish Barb had short stout legs, a short back, and a wide face with large nostrils. They possessed amazing endurance and could survive even on a sparse diet.



Lakota knife sheath (circa 1900); Chippewa knife sheath, by Debbie Harrington, Chippewa (2006); Métis knife sheath, by Gary Johnson, Métis (2005); Cheyenne knife sheath (circa 1930)

Four beaded knife sheaths from four tribes not present when Lewis and Clark came through Montana reflect the artistic styles the newcomers brought to their new homeland.

All MHS Museum, Helena, Cheyenne knife sheath, gift of Madelyn Ballantyne Lange Love



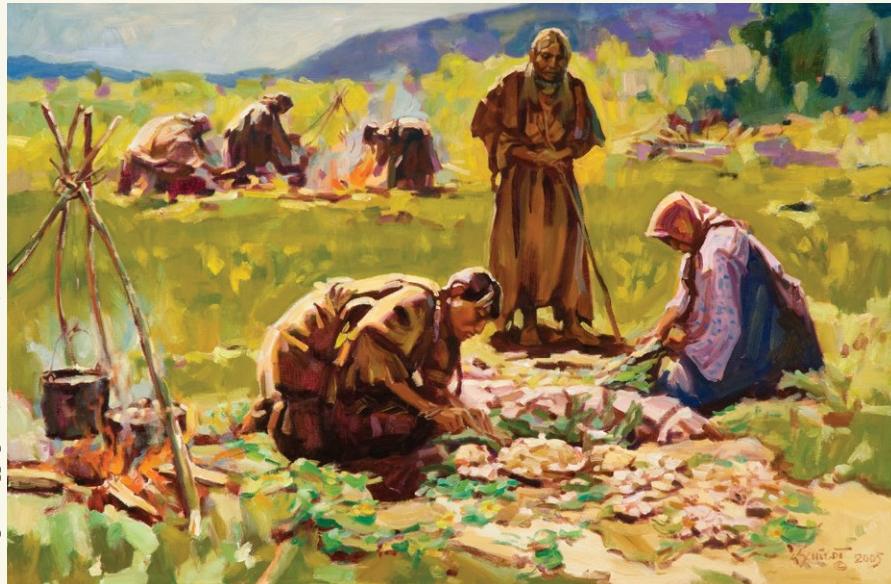
MHS Museum, Helena

Gathering, by John Potter, Anishinabe (2005, oil on canvas mural)

Indians inhabited a landscape that they purposefully and extensively manipulated to preserve and enhance plant and animal resources. They used fire to influence the density of forests, to establish and expand grasslands, and to maintain existing plant communities. Fire diversified their environment into a mosaic of interconnected habitats and altered the numbers and species of animals it supported. This landscape was a living being in the eyes of inhabitants who accorded their lands treatment and respect which can only be characterized as reverential or religious.

Although Lewis and Clark saw Indian-set fires and even submerged their canoes at Camp Fortunate to prevent their destruction by thicket-clearing riparian-zone fires, they failed to understand the breadth and motivation of Indian ecologic manipulation by fire. Throughout the journey, the Corps maintained the mistaken view that they were traversing a primal wilderness.

Painting and digging stick, MHS Museum, Helena



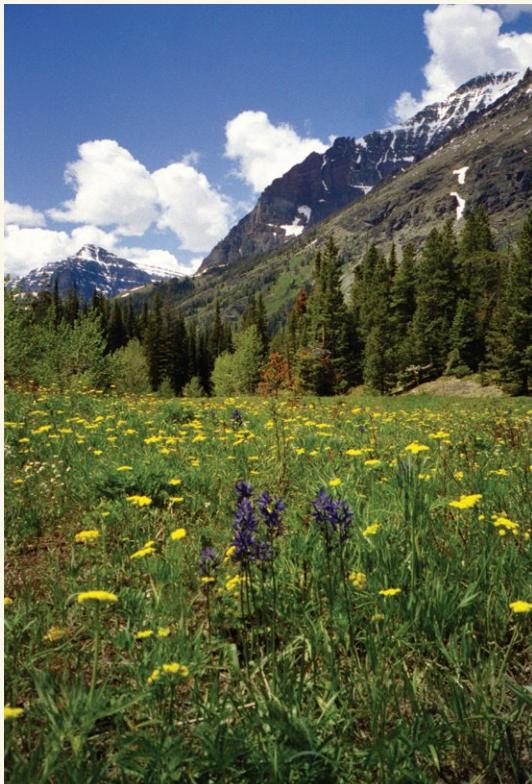
Preparing and Cooking Camas, by Gary Schildt, Blackfeet (2005, oil on canvas)

Camas was a major food source for Montana tribes. Women dug camas roots, then cleaned, peeled, and baked them in a covered pit oven. At the time of Lewis and Clark, the Blackfeet had access to more Euro-American trade goods than most other Montana tribes. The metal pot in the left foreground would have been acquired from their northern relatives who traded at Hudson's Bay Company posts.



Modern Salish digging stick, by Gordon Schlieb (2004)

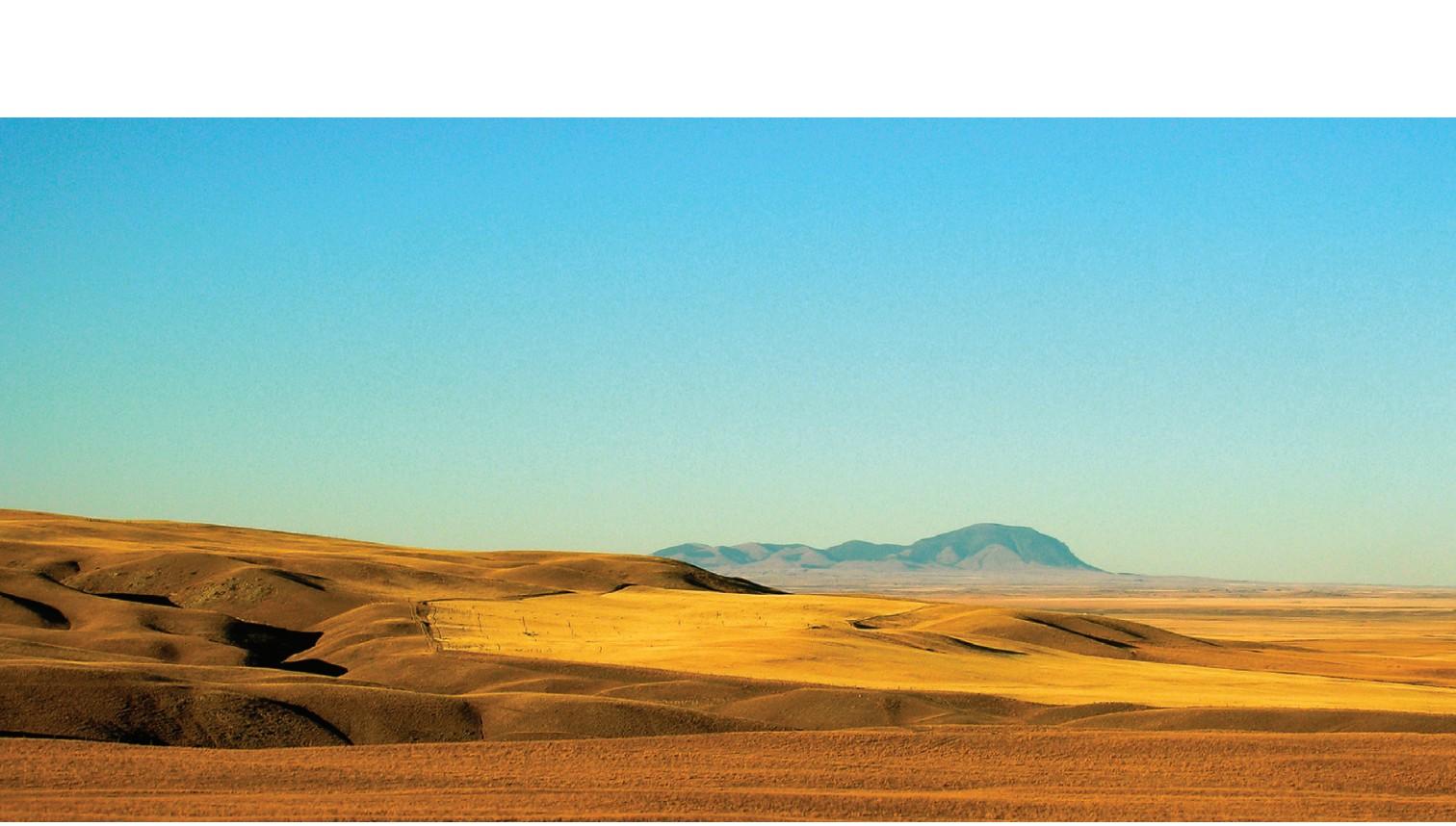
Root harvesting and the ceremonies and prayers that accompany it remain important traditional activities of native peoples. The traditions remain the same, the tools have been modernized.



Courtesy Jude Oberst

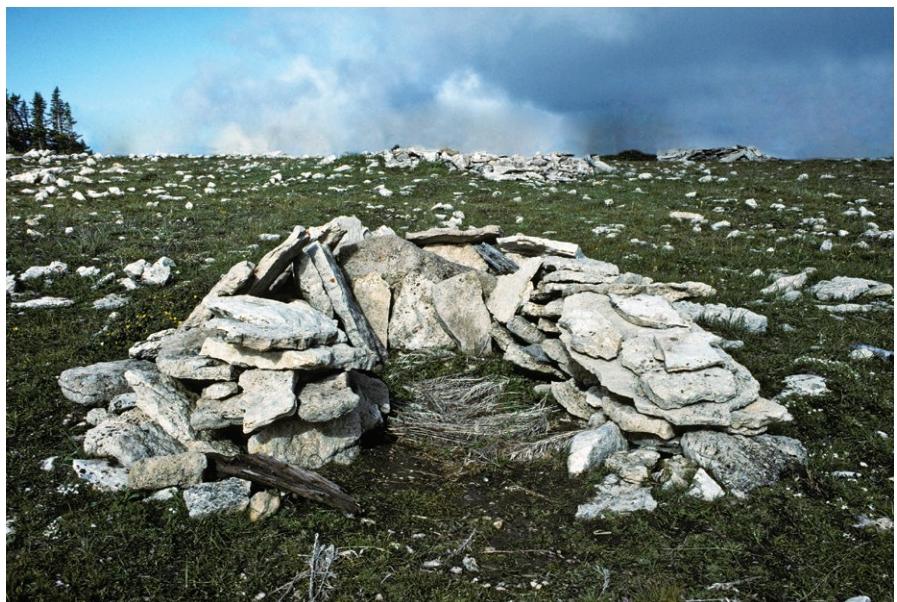
Extent of the Resource, by Jude Oberst (2004)

The blue-purple camas and yellow biscuit root in this meadow on the western edge of the Blackfeet Reservation would yield much food to a harvester knowledgeable about wild plants. The food-producing skills of native plant harvesters and hunters allowed the Corps to complete their journey. Without the generosity of the Shoshones, Salish, and the Nez Perces, they would have starved or been forced to retreat.



The Sweet Grass Hills, by Doug O'looney (2006)

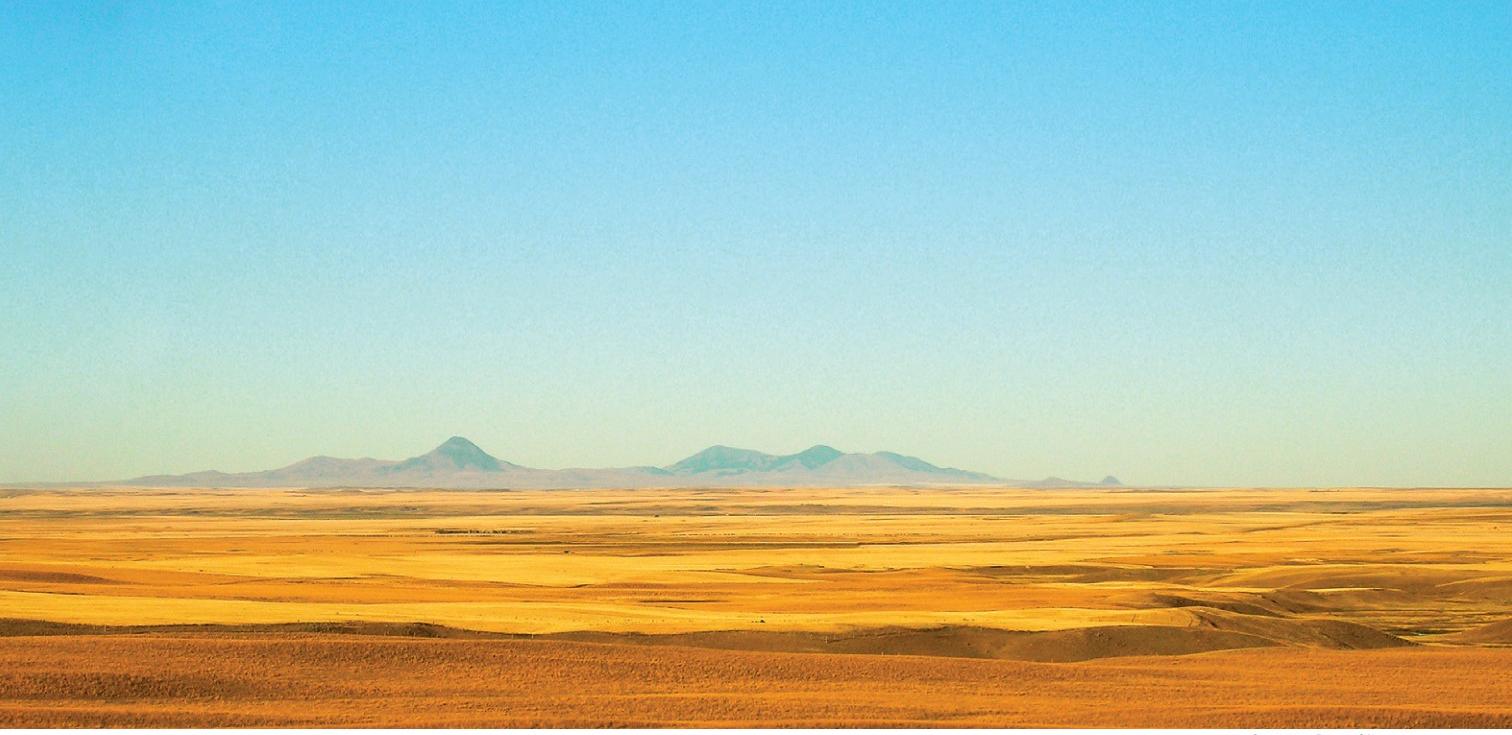
In 1805, Lewis and Clark entered a sacred landscape, but as members of a culture whose worship mostly took place in special buildings, they were unable to recognize or understand the spiritual attitudes that native peoples held toward their homelands—lands that met all of their material and spiritual needs. Native peoples, in turn, sustained and renewed the land with prayer and ceremony. From sites where tribal members had direct encounters with sacred beings, to lands that provided sustaining foodstuffs, to burial and sacrifice locations, the land had become sacred because it nurtured “all my relations.” Many Montana tribes still use the Sweetgrass Hills—called the Sweet Pine Hills by the Blackfeet—for important ceremonies. Rich in game animals, these lush islands on the prairie also provide many important food and ceremonial plants.



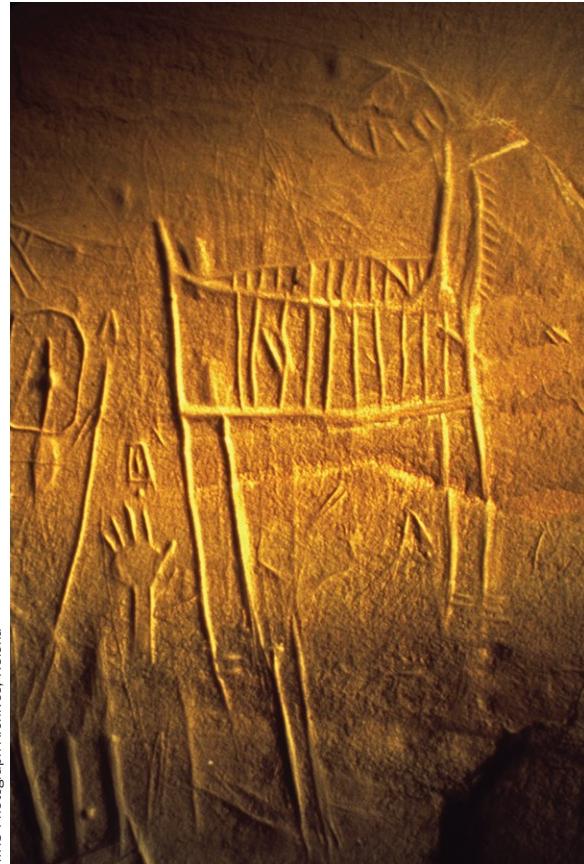
Courtesy Andrew Gulliford

Vision Quest Site, by Andrew Gulliford (1992)

This vision quest enclosure lies within the Big Horn Medicine Wheel in north-central Wyoming. The fresh sage offering in the enclosure indicates recent use.



Courtesy Doug O'looney



MHS Photograph Archives, Helena

Courtesy Tom Ferris



Hunting Panel Petroglyph, by Stu Conner (1968); Tipi Ring, by Tom Ferris (1996)

Rock art and ancestral habitation sites are among the places native peoples honor as sacred. The tipi ring above is on a ranch north of Shelby, Montana. In the petroglyph at left are an atlatl dart and atlatl. These hunting implements predate bows and arrows, indicating that this panel may be over a thousand years old.

Montana Historical Society Indian Advisory Panel

The Montana Historical Society owes a debt of gratitude to the numerous people who served on its Indian Advisory Panel and assisted in the creation of the *Neither Empty Nor Unknown* exhibit. In 2002, two cultural representatives from Montana's seven reservations, the landless Little Shell Chippewa, and the Helena Indian Alliance (representing urban native communities) and a professor from each of the seven tribal colleges joined the panel. Because not all of the original members were able to serve for the entire four-year period required to complete the exhibit, other representatives graciously volunteered to take their places.

Panel members provided extensive information about his or her tribe's homeland in 1800 and geographic names in the tribal language. The advisors recorded stories and explained cultural practices. They also identified artists within their communities who might be willing to research techniques for making 1800-style clothing and tools and to produce replicas using appropriate materials and methods. These artists are among the many tribal members who provided invaluable assistance. This exhibit would have been impossible without the guidance and generosity of Montana's Indian people.

Blackfeet Reservation

Shirley Crow Shoe
Marietta King
Darrell R. Kipp
Rosalyn R. LaPier

Crow Reservation

Kitty Belle Deer Nose
Elias Goes Ahead
Lanny Real Bird
Susan Stewart

Flathead Reservation

(Kootenai, Pend d'Oreille,
and Salish)
Francis Auld
Julie Cajune
Michael Dolson
Patricia Hewankorn
Tony Incashola

Fort Belknap Reservation

(Assiniboine and Gros Ventre)
John Allen
Morris Belgard
James Main Sr.
Lynette K. Chandler
Sean Chandler

Fort Peck Reservation

(Assiniboine and Sioux)
Robert P. Four Star
Joseph McGeshick
Curley Youpee
Marvin Youpee

Little Shell Chippewa

Henry Anderson
James Parker Shield

Montana Historical Society Board of Trustees

George Horse Capture, Gros
Ventre
Steve Lozar, Salish and Kootenai

Northern Cheyenne Reservation

Norma Bixby
George Elk Shoulder
Conrad Fisher

Rocky Boy's Reservation

(Chippewa and Cree)
Pat Chief Stick
Robert Murie
Russell Standing Rock

Urban Populations

Carol Mason, Helena Indian
Alliance



Courtesy Ken Blackbird

A Cultural Landscape, by Ken Blackbird, Assiniboine (1990)

For traditional Indian people, time is not a one-way trip through a linear history. The enormous changes brought to the Indian world by Euramericans altered much of Indian life, yet much of the core remains the same. To explain Indian time, reference is often made to its cyclic nature—creating a vision of endless repetitions among those unfamiliar with the concept. Rather, time may be seen as circling around an immutable core of being. As such, a contemporary Indian may be a surgeon who speaks English and drives a Toyota but whose spiritual and family life reflect practices and beliefs that predate Lewis and Clark by eons. Not only did Indian people not disappear, they retain the elements which define them as Crow or Cree or Blackfeet, as this photograph of a modern Indian homestead with frame house, trailer, sweat lodge, and tipi shows.

This exhibit would not have been possible without the generous support of:

The National Park Service – Lewis and Clark National Historic Trail
The Montana Lewis and Clark Bicentennial Commission
The Montana History Foundation
The Montana Historical Society's August and Mary Sobotka Educational Trust
The Friends of the Society
And many private donors



Swift Fox, by Jay Laber, Blackfeet (2004, recycled metals)

Each year thousands of bison drowned crossing the Missouri River, turning every riparian thicket into ideal grizzly bear habitat, a situation Lewis and Clark came to dread. Today the huge herds no longer exist, grizzlies have been displaced from the plains, and species like the swift fox are nearly extinct. Montana tribes have played and continue to play an important role in environmental protection and species recovery. A symbolic animal for many Plains tribes, the swift (or kit) fox policed the camp, spiritually guarding and protecting the residents. The Blackfeet tribe has a namesake society and is funding and managing a project to restore this fox on its reservation. Artist Jay Laber's sculpture is constructed of discarded objects found in one of the fox reintroduction areas.

MHS Museum, Helena